DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 257 602 RC 015 284

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TITLE Research and Data Needs for Small/Rural Schools.
PUB DATE 17 Jun 85
NOTE 9p.; A position paper prepared for the National Center for Education Statistics. In consideration of NCES's plans for the redesign of their Elementary and Secondary Data Program.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classification; Data Analysis; Databases; *Data Collection; Definitions; Educational Quality; Elementary Secondary Education; Equal Education; Position Papers; *Research Needs; Rural Areas; *Rural Education; Rural Schools; Rural Urban Differences; School Size; *Small Schools
IDENTIFIERS *Access to Information; Educational Diversity; *National Center for Educational Statistics; Rural Education Association

ABSTRACT

Information available on rural education remains startlingly inadequate--partly because of the great diversity of rural areas, because agencies responsible for data collection disagree on the definition of small/rural schools, and because large metropolitan schools have received far more than their share of attention, research, and financial support. Not until 1983 did the Department of Education announce a policy that would provide rural education with an equitable share of the Department's resources. In the redesign of the elementary and secondary data program conducted by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), the Rural Education Association strongly encourages the inclusion of small/rural schools as a specific category in data collection and reporting and recommends that NCES break down the data based on school districts of fewer than 300, 300-999, 1,000-2,500, and more than 2,500 students. This classification would more accurately reflect rural, suburban, and urban similarities and differences and provide policy analysts, public educators, and others interested in education with valuable information to assess American public education. (JHZ)

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RESEARCH AND DATA NEEDS FOR SMALL/RURAL SCHOOLS

A Position Paper prepared for the
National Center for Education Statistics

In consideration of NCES's plans for the
Redesign of their Elementary and Secondary
Data Program

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June 17, 1985

JUN 1985
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RC015284

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RESEARCH AND DATA NEEDS FOR SMALL/RURAL SCHOOLS

by

Bruce Barker

Although discussion of research and development needs for small/rural schools is becoming more prevalent, the state of knowledge and information currently available on rural education remains incomplete and startlingly inadequate. The first National Seminar on Rural Education held in Washington, D. C. in May, 1979 recognized the need to collect, analyze, and compile data pertinent to rural education (Flectcher, 1979/80). Tamblyn (1977) indicated that one of the major tasks in the 1980's for rural education was the need to conduct basic research on small school problems, practices, and unique features. Horn (1981) declared that one of the responsibilities facing universities is to conduct research and collect data on rural schools. And, Nachtigal (1979) specifically stated that descriptive data are needed on the operation of K-12 rural school systems with enrollments of fewer than 300 students, 300-999 students, and 1000-2500 students.

The Problem of Definitions for Rural Education

Lack of a precise definition may be one reason rural education has received little attention in recent years. Rural education has been a difficult entity to define because the word "rural" has different meanings when viewed historically, statistically, or philosophically (Salmon, 1980). Furthermore, the concept of "rural education" varies from state to state and region to region. Both Texas and Oregon, for example, define a small/rural district as

having fewer than 1000 students (Barker, 1985). Since 1970, the U.S. Census Bureau has carefully defined the rural population as consisting of all persons living in places of fewer than 2500 inhabitants or in areas of extended cities with a population density of less than 1000 persons per square mile (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1970). The National Advisory Council on the Education for Disadvantaged Children uses the Census Bureau's definition to state that a rural district is, therefore, one having fewer that 2500 students (Special Report on Rural Education, 1979). Other definitions include those of the American Association of School Administrators which has established a K-12 enrollment of 2000 or less as a small district and the National Association of Secondary School Principals which considers an enrollment of 1000 or less to be a small high school (Jinks, 1984).

Some of these definitions imply that rural America collectively consists of all our society's nonmetropolitan areas. Inference is also made that this portion of our society is basically homogeneous in nature and composition. In reality, rural America is a vast array of diverse nonmetropolitan areas which may be internally more homogeneous that most urban communities, but which differ widely from each other. For example, an island hamlet off the coast of Maine, an Alaskan native village near the Arctic Circle, a coal mining town in West Virginia, a ranching area in Wyoming, an impoverished community in the Mississippi Delta, a ski resort section of Vermont, or a prosperous grain farming region in Iowa have little in common, except that they are all classified by the Census Bureau as rural areas of the United States (Sher, 1977).

The Lack of Attention Given Rural Schools

Federal statistics reveal that 59.5 million Americans live outside designated urban areas of the United States and that rural school students constitute the largest minority public school population in this country (Treadway, 1984; Sher, 1977). Based on the Census Bureau's definition of "rural," nearly two-thirds of the 15,600 operating public school districts located in the United States are in rural areas and one student in every three attends an elementary or secondary school classified as rural (REA News, 1982). Ironically, however, the "lion's share" of attention, research and an over balance of federal and state financial support generally go to large schools in metropolitan areas. Not until late 1983, four years after the establishment of the U. S. Department of Education, did that federal department declare a "Rural Education and Rural Family Education Policy for the 1980's" which stated, "Rural education shall receive an equitable share of the information, services, assistance, and funds available from and through the Department of Education and its programs" (ERIC CRESS, 1983/84). In 1983, the National Center for Education Statistics also agreed, for the first time, to include small and rural schools of under 300 students as a separate category for data collection (REA News, 1983). Up until the time of these two actions, national policy makers and researchers had paid little attention to rural schools.

Rural Education Research and Data Needs

Among the expressed goals of the national Rural Education Association is to encourage ". . . the collection and dissemination of . . . statistical data and other appropriate information relating

to rural education" (REA, 1980). A National Rural Education Research Agenda endorsed by the Rural Education Association calls for research relevant to rural education in nine broad categories (Barker and Stephens, 1985).

1. Rural schcol effectiveness
2. Staff development and professional support
3. Curriculum and instruction
4. Taxonomy of rural education
5. Federal, State, and local policies impacting rural schools and communities
6. Rural school finance
7. School district governance and organization
8. Assessment of rural school assumptions
9. Role of the school in rural development

These themes may not encompass all of the research needs for small/rural schools, but they do establish the major areas in which research is to be focused. Moreover, data collected in these areas will provide policy makers and rural school practitioners information to knowledgeably affect small/rural schools improvement.

In the redesign of the elementary and secondary data program conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics, the Rural Education Association strongly encourages the inclusion of small/rural schools as a specific category in the collection and reporting of data. In light of the various definitions associated with rural education, it would seem that the collection and reporting of data on the basis of school district enrollment size would be the most utilitarian approach. Rural schools have always been, and will likely continue to be, characterized by smallness. According to Sher (1977), small public schools and small school districts have become increasingly rare in America's metropolitan centers. Urban schools and districts have generally always had larger student bodies than rural ones. With continued political and economic pressure to

centralize schools, the issues of the small public school will become almost exclusively rural, for rural areas will be the only places such public school exist in significant numbers.

In the collection and reporting of education data, the Rural Education Association recommends that NCES, whenever possible, break down the data based on school districts of fewer than 300 students, 300-999 students, 1000-2500 students, and those in excess of 2500 students. Such a classification would more accurately reflect rural, suburban, and urban similarities and differences. In addition, the availability of comparative data at the national level would provide policy analysts, public educators, and others interested in education with valuable information to assess American public education.

Conclusion

It is impossible to treat rural education as one single or common entity. Rural education encompasses everything from a one-room country schoolhouse in northern Vermont to a sparsely populated western school district responsible for education in a several hundred square mile region. It includes districts having solid financial resources and others with very limited funding sources. Some of America's fastest growing districts, as well as those experiencing the most rapid enrollment decline, are in rural areas. Because of this diversity, much of the effort put forth to improve rural schools can best be met at the local level, where area specific problems can be addressed and treated.

It is not expected that the collection and reporting of national data on the basis of public school district enrollment size will solve the many challenges facing rural educators. Such information

will, however, enable local administrators to more knowledgeably assess the operation and management of their own school systems and will provide them with reference information on school systems of similar size. In our nation's quest for excellence in education, the data and information needs for small/rural schools must be included in any collection of statistics conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics.

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